

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE4106

McLean, Margaret

(1845 - 1923)

Born 7 April, 1845, Irvine Ayrshire Scotland

Died 14 February, 1923, Malvern Victoria Australia

Occupation Suffragist, Teacher, Temperance activist, Women's rights activist

Summary

Margaret McLean, a founding member of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria in 1887, became Melbourne's foremost advocate of votes for women.

An active and well-known feminist, Margaret McLean was the first person to sign the Women's Suffrage petition. She signed the petition as Mrs. William McLean, possibly to indicate the support of her husband, who was an influential Melbourne businessman.

Despite receiving little recognition for her feminist activities, Margaret McLean was a strong political force for women's rights in Melbourne throughout her life.

Details

Born in Ayrshire, Scotland in 1845, Margaret was the eldest child of Andrew Arnot, builder and carpenter, and his wife Agnes. The family migrated to Melbourne in 1849 where her father became treasurer of the Melbourne Total Abstinence Society.

Margaret became a teacher at the United Methodist Free Church School, Fitzroy in 1859 and as such, was one of the first trained teachers in Melbourne. She attended the Melbourne Training Institution for teachers from 1862-64, and worked as an assistant at a range of voluntary work, including visiting gaols, courts, and public houses, spending whole nights in slum areas, endeavouring to assist and protect young women.

Margaret Arnot married William McLean, a hardware merchant on 10 March 1869 in Fitzroy. They later built and lived in Torloisk, East Melbourne. She was baptised by the Rev. James Taylor at the Collins Street Baptist Church in 1866. Her husband died some years before she did, in 1905.

Margaret McLean became the founding President of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) of Victoria in 1887. She was the first president of the Melbourne Branch of the WCTU, and was the acting president and president of WCTU Victoria from 1891-1893 and again from 1899-1907. During these twelve years she travelled extensively throughout Victoria working for the WCTU.

Her pamphlets *Womanhood Suffrage* (1890) and its sequel *More about womanhood suffrage* were circulated widely. She was instrumental in organising the *Victorian Women's Petition for the franchise*, presented to parliament in 1891. The petition had 30,000 signatures, gained over 10 weeks, and Margaret McLean was the first person to sign it.

In 1893 the WCTU made a plea for equal pay for women.

Margaret McLean led a delegation to the Chief Commissioner of Police urging the appointment of women police and facilities for women at lock-ups. This was after learning that about 40 women were arrested each week as a result of protests against the prevalence of 'sweating' and a call for female factory inspectors.

In 1900, she was the Australian delegate to the World's WCTU Convention in Edinburgh, Scotland, where she also conducted a service in St Giles' Cathedral.

In March 1902, seeking the support of a wider constituency, she moved the resolution which began the National Council of Women in Victoria. This organisation, with the WCTU, pressed for women's suffrage, juvenile courts, police matrons and other reforms, including raising the age of consent.

She was appointed honorary life president of the WCTU in 1907 in recognition of her long and distinguished service to the organisation. This decision was made by a special resolution at the 1907 Convention of the WCTU. In 1908 the right to vote was granted to women, and the age of consent was raised from 12 to 16 years.

In retirement, Margaret continued to work for temperance, social reform and the Baptist Church. All photographs taken of Margaret McLean show her wearing a white ribbon tied in a bow, the badge adopted by the WCTU to symbolise purity.

Margaret McLean died in Malvern on 14 February 1923, survived by eight of her eleven children. Six of her daughters' lives reflected aspects of their mother's career. Only Eva (1886-1968) and Jessie (1888-1964), a graphic artist, led domestic lives. Ethel (1873-1940) was head of staff at Lauriston Girls' School, Melbourne. Winifred Lucie (1877-1944) was a nurse, Hilda (1879-1938) was a Baptist missionary in India, and Alice (1884-1949; Dr Alice Barber) graduated in medicine in 1906 and was a missionary in India for many years. Dr Barber also helped to run the Women's Hospital, Melbourne, during World War I and later practised psychotherapy, making an influential contribution to its establishment in Melbourne.

Published resources

Resource Section

McLean, Margaret (1845-1923), Hyslop, Anthea, 2006, <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A100322b.htm>

Mrs William McLean of East Melbourne, Wright, Norman, http://wiki.prov.vic.gov.au/index.php/McLean#Mrs_William_McLean_of_East_Melbourne

Newspaper Article

A Social Reformer (in the series 'Our Pioneers'), Brown, Basil S, 1992

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Author Details

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